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Title : Effects of the blue crab fishery on marine wildlife in Florida waters: impacts and mitigation efforts

Category : Conservation

Student : Not Applicable

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Abstract : The blue crab fishery supports one of the most substantial commercial and recreational fisheries in the State of Florida. Blue crabs are harvested continually throughout the year in coastal habitats including fresh, brackish, and salt waters. An estimated million derelict traps lost annually by this industry represent a serious risk to marine species including manatees, dolphins, and sea turtles. Between 1976-2002, approximately 620 manatees were rescued in Florida. Of these, 84 were due to entanglements in crab traps and/or lines. These entanglements lead to seven flipper amputations and eight manatee deaths. An estimated 54 dolphin strandings were attributed to crab trap entanglements in the southeast US from 1997-2001; only seven survived. From 1980-2001, 113 sea turtle carcasses were entangled in traps and/or lines.

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To address this concern, the Entanglement Working Group concentrated efforts on reducing the impacts of entanglement in the State of Florida. A research project was initiated to categorize manatee behaviors in the presence of crab pots and explore options for reducing gear interactions (see Bowles, this conference). Three clean-ups were undertaken by 23 volunteers in the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, 2001-2002. These clean-ups removed 86 traps and 135 floats with rope, during 16 hours of effort. Findings were used to assist managers in regulatory decisions regarding the fishery. Recently, the State of Florida approved several regulatory changes to facilitate removal of trap debris and derelict traps. The Entanglement Working Group plans to conduct future clean-ups in newly authorized areas to compile additional data in coordination with the blue crab fishery.